Man between Infinites

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The great astronomical discoveries of the sixteenth century initiated a turning point in the intellectual history of the West. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the concept of man's existence within an orderly universe appears to have been losing ground. Writers and preachers were indulging in what may be called a cosmology of corruption.[1] The universe seemed to have lost all harmony and stability. Mutability extended from the earth to the heavens and man was lost in an incoherent world.

It was Pascal who drew the philosophical consequences from the impact of the "new philosophy" of nature upon the condition of man. He reset, as it were, the compass of Christian faith in accordance with a changed universe. His existential pathos and his insight into the human condition can, therefore, neither be reduced to the non-Christian perspective of contemporary existentialism, nor can they be separated from the conception of the universe. To understand existentialism historically as well as systematically, we have to refer to the new concept of an infinite universe which seems at first to be the farthest removed from any immediate existential concern of a self with itself. It is my thesis here that we "exist" (in the sense of existentialism) because we are lost in the universe of modern natural science. This was clearly realized by Pascal, but not by Kierkegaard and his followers.

For Kierkegaard, existence is the only "interest" of relevant thinking; it is the inter-esse between theoretical thought and reality, that on which theoretical metaphysics necessarily is stranded. Existence as such

1 S. V. Harris, *All Coherence Gone* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

is, to use Schelling's term, "unforethinkable", and yet the only serious interest of an existing thinker. Irritated by this inexplicable fact of the contingency of our existence, Kierkegaard advances the questions: "Who am I? How came I here? What is this thing called the world? [...] Why was I not consulted? [...] How did I obtain an interest in this big enterprise they call reality? [...] And if I am compelled to take part in it, where is the director? I should like to make a remark to him."

Almost the same question was raised two centuries earlier by Pascal.

> "When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill [...], cast into the infinite immersity of spaces of which I am ignorant and which know me not, I am frightened, and shocked at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and time been allotted to me?"

In spite of the resemblance of Pascal's last sentence to Kierkegaard's sarcastic exclamations, there is a distinct difference of tone and intention. With Pascal, the frightful contingency of man's existence is apprehended within a definite frame of reference: the spatial and temporal infinites of the physical universe. For Pascal, the world is not a "big enterprise", but the majestic and overwhelming reality of the physical universe. With Kierkegaard and the existentialists, this physical universe, as conceived by modern natural science, is absent, or more precisely, it is present only as the insignificant background of man's forlorn existence. Insignificant as this background seems to be existentially, it is the reverse of existence as understood by existentialism.

The "world" which Sartre, Heidegger and Kierkegaard describe and analyze concretely is neither a living cosmos nor a creation, nor is it the universe of mathematical physics. It is *our* world of selfhood and interhuman relations within an anonymous mass-society–it is a world without nature. With Sartre, nature is an opaque *en-soi,* over against the *pour-soi* of human existence, and accessible only in the natural appetites of the human body. In Heidegger, nature is subsumed under the lowest category of the merely "extant" [*Vorhandensein*], in distinction to the human *Dasein* which alone can exist and have a world. Neither the social world nor the natural world can relieve us of the necessity of taking over the sheer "factuality" of our contingent existence, of "being cast" into the world.

Kierkegaard is exclusively concerned with man's inner life. He resumes Augustine's quest for the soul and its relation to God as the only two things worth knowing. He thereby implicitly dismisses the classical concern with the logos of the cosmos as a pagan curiosity. A sentence like that of Anaxagoras, that the end for which man is born is the contemplation of the sun, the moon, and the sky, is utterly strange to Kierkegaard and his followers. It is equally strange to those of us who, unencumbered by a god or a soul, but clothed in psychology and psychoanalysis, are living on the capital of the Christian concern for man's soul. Confronted with the task of recapturing a Christian existence according to the law of the Gospel, Kierkegaard felt that he had to ignore the laws of the cosmos and the modern discoveries of the telescope. If Christ appeared today, he said, the Christian task of appropriating His message would still be the same as it was for the first generation of Christians. But the natural scientist, and all those who believe in the truth of science rather than of the Gospel, would demand an examination of Christ's brain under a microscope to determine whether He is the Son of God or a schizophrenic. Unfortunately for the sciences, all the modern discoveries by telescope and microscope are irrelevant for an understanding of the human condition in its inwardness. A thoughtful person, according to Kierkegaard, who wants to understand what it means to exist as a self before God cannot be interested in natural science; for it does not make any difference for man's moral choices and religious decisions whether the moon is made of blue cheese or something else. What is the use of explaining the whole physical universe or world history if one does not understand oneself, one's own single self? As an existing self, man is singled out from the physical cosmos and world history and their deceptive greatness. To Kierkegaard the concern with six thousand years of world history, or with some billion years of cosmic history, is an escape from one's self into an illusory importance.

Thus, if anything unites these philosophies of existence by a common pattern it is the negative experience that man has no definite place and nature within the natural universe. This metaphysical displacement is, however, not a novelty of the twentieth century, but rather the modern destiny. "Since Copernicus", Nietzsche said, "man is falling from a center toward an X." This universal destiny is aggravated by man's social solitariness amid a modern mass-society.

Neither classical philosophy nor Christian theology saw man's

position in the universe in this way. For Aristotle, existence as such was an unquestioned element within the essential structure, order, and beauty of an imperishable and clearly delimited cosmos, a cosmos which included the existence of rational animals called men. As an animal, man shared in the properties of living things; as a rational animal he had the privilege of contemplating this perfect hierarchy of beings. For St. Thomas, man and the universe were contingent existences, but contingent to God and bound together by the act of creation. Though man alone was created in the likeness of God, and thus set apart from and above the animal world, the unified Christian concept worked for man and world alike. Only with the dissolution of these ancient convictions, classic and Christian, did existentialism come into its own. For if the universe is neither eternal and divine (as it was for Aristotle), nor contingent but created (as it was for St. Thomas), and if man has no definite place and status in the hierarchy of an eternal or created cosmos, then he begins to "exist" in it like an outcast in an "ecstatic" condition. And since none of us is exempt from the impact of the dissolution of these ancient beliefs and certainties, since we cannot restore the universe of Aristotle or St. Thomas, even less the post-Cartesian synthesis of Hegel, we are all "existentialists" whether we like it or not. It is not a "failure of nerve" (as has been suggested) which brought existentialism into existence. What failed us was not our nerve, but rather our belief in a divinely ordered universe in which man could feel himself at home, or *chez soi,* as it were. No social order of whatever kind, not even order plus freedom, can possibly make up for that lack of fundamental order in the universe. Hence, we have indeed "to be", or exist, in all those descriptive terms of sheer factuality, contingency, and absurdity which existentialism has brought to light. For how can one feel at home in an "exploding" universe, the chance result of statistical probabilities? Such a universe cannot inspire confidence and sympathy, nor can it give orientation and meaning to man's existence in it. We are indeed cast into this world and therefore must postulate ourselves, having postulated such a universe with such unexpected success. It is the character of our world and world concept which makes us exist existentially.

What makes us uncomfortable and throws us back upon ourselves is that our modern universe has no center and no limits. As an infinite universe of indefinite limits, it has no definite place for a finite man. If infinity has to be included in the image of the world, the point is reached

where every image ends–the point of the nebulae of astrophysics, those scattered fragments of an initial explosion a hundred million light-years distant from us. We can disregard the important changes which, since Newton, have occurred in mathematical physics, for the world has not become again an encompassable world-order. Einstein's conception of "finite" space, and the assumption that beyond certain limits the concepts of space and time cease to be applicable, by no means restore the universe as an imaginable home for man. Such a universe can perhaps still be described, or rather calculated, but it can no longer be imagined; and the scientist who calculates it does not live in it as a human person.[2]

"Infinity" is a term which was at first applied not to the physical universe but was reserved for its creator.[3] The natural scientist of early modern times considered infinity to be an attribute of God. Thus, when Copernicus and Kepler studied the structure of the planetary system, they believed that they were finding the spirit of God in the mathematical laws of nature. When Newton explained Kepler's laws in terms of mechanics, it was held that the world could be explained in purely physical terms. What still defied mechanical explanation was the origin of the planetary system. But when Laplace rendered its mechanical origin probable, thus confirming the cosmological theory of Kant, he declined to speak of God and to involve practical moral reason, while theoretical reason, the understanding of nature, needed, as he said, only some matter to construct the physical world on a few principles invested in man's reason.

But Kant's "Copernican revolution" was already initiated by Descartes' distinction of man and world as *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. Consequently the modern consciousness is a profoundly divided one. It lives in two different worlds of extreme subjectivity and objectivity, worlds which are as opposed to each other as they are interdependent. In a famous passage at the end of his *Critiqaue of Practical Reason*, Kant formulates it this way:

> "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above us and the moral law within us. [...] I see

2 See M. Buber, *Between Man and Man* (London: Keagan Paul, 1947), Chap. 5.
3 See C. F. von Weizsäcker, *The History of Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), pp. 60 ff.

them before me and connect them directly with the consciousness of my existence. The former begins from the place I occupy in the external world of sense, and enlarges my connection therein to an unbounded extent with worlds upon worlds and systems of systems, and moreover into limitless times of their periodic motion its beginning and continuance. The second begins from my invisible self, my personality, and exhibits me in a world which has true infinity but which is traceable only by the inner understanding, and with which I discern that I am not in a merely contingent [...] connection."

Objectively, the two worlds are strictly separate: in the face of the universe natural man is nothing; in relation to his moral consciousness, as a person, he is all-important. In the *Critique of Pure Reason,* Kant goes even further. He realizes, like a radical existentialist, the impossibility of establishing the inner necessity of the whole creation, for to establish it, we would have to know that there is an ultimate principle of existence which exists necessarily or essentially. But we cannot conceive of *any* existence, not even of God, as necessarily existing, as the ultimate cause of contingent existences.

"That unconditioned necessity, which we require as the last support of all things, is the true abyss of human reason. [...] We cannot put off the thought, nor can we support it, that a Being, which we represent to ourselves as the highest among all possible beings, should say to himself: *I am from eternity to eternity, there is nothing beside me, except that which is something through my will– but whence am I?* Here all sinks away from under us, and the highest perfection, like the smallest, passes without support before the eyes of speculative reason, which finds no difficulty in making the one as well as the other to disappear without the slightest impediment."

What remains is radical, universal contingency of existence, or existence "without support". Such a thought is, however, "intolerable" for human reason; while its opposite, inner necessity, is "undemonstrable" for it. The difference between Kant and contemporary existentialists is that the latter apparently have managed to find radical contingency tolerable and even liberating, and the demonstrability of an inherent necessity of existence to be unnecessary.

It is not difficult to imagine where Kant's admiration of the starry heavens above us and the moral law within us might lead. It needs only a slight shift in temper, from awe and admiration to a neutral recognition, and from there to a positivistic acceptance of the "findings" of the telescope on the one hand, and of the Freudian "superego" on the other, to circumscribe what ist now commonly held to be man's position in the universe. For some people, the only link which still connects the firmament with humanity is the horoscope. If this disproportion between man and the universe is not always clearly felt, it is due to our obsession with the immediate problems of our social world and to the confusion of the natural universe with our scientific construction of it, which is indeed ours and not contrived by the universe itself.

To understand this disproportion correctly–that is, as an essential disorder–I refer now to Pascal as the first existentialist of the modern age.

Pascal and his older contemporary, Descartes, both realized that the order of the scholastic system had become untenable. Their common starting point was a radical doubt with respect to traditional certainties, in order to reach a new kind of assurance. Descartes believed himself to have attained the new certainty, beyond any doubt, by radical reasoning. Pascal felt, as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche felt after him, that Descartes' doubt was still superficial and also, consequently, the certainty which he had extracted from it. According to Pascal, only the certainty of faith can counterbalance the fundamental doubtfulness of our human being and knowing, including the knowledge of the abstract sciences. For the ultimate axioms of mathematics are as evident as they are undemonstrable. "It may be that there are true demonstrations; but this is not certain. Thus, this proves only that it is not certain that all is uncertain"–which testifies once more to the "glory of skepticism." The master of both Descartes and Pascal, who stimulated in them the sense of skepticism, was Montaigne; but he was satisfied with undermining all kinds of dogmatic certainties, while enjoying the superior refinement of skeptical suspense.

In our doctrinaire age, where people long for guidance, security, and constructive results, skepticism has fallen into disrepute. The deprecator of skepticism has forgotten, however, that genuine skepticism (which means, literally, keen observation and investigation) is the result of a radical search for truth. Only by the highest standard of truth, whether attainable or not, can one realize the doubtfulness and the

illusions of our human judgments. The degree to which Descartes' and Pascal's doubt is radical, therefore, is in direct proportion to the rigor of their quest for certain truth. Descartes is striving for absolute certainty by means of his doubt; Pascal erects religious faith on the "truth of skepticism".

The never-failing spring from which Pascal drew his skepticism was the study of man on the pattern of Montaigne; but he probed much deeper than his master into the ultimate ground of man's uncertainties, illusions and contradictions. The two opposite and extreme standards by which his skepticsm has to be judged are the lawful certainty of mathematical demonstration on the one hand, and the fleeting certainty of faith on the other. Thus, the wealth and acuteness of Pascal's moralistic observations and reflections, the range of his study of man, have to be interpreted within the context of Pascal, the scientist and the believer.

Pascal combined in his person the genius of a creative mathematician with the insight of a profound moralist and Christian believer, or to use his own terms, the "spirit of geometry" with the "spirit of subtle intuition" *(esprit de finesse)*, and both with the "reason of the heart". As a natural scientist, he had the intellectual superiority of knowing the kind of world into which we are cast. As a keen moralist, familiar with the habits and passions of the men of the world in the grand style, he had the social superiority of the *honnête homme*. As a Christian believer who had suffered the joy of a mystical experience, he had the spiritual superiority of radical submission and renunciation over all those whose experience is confined to that of a mastering scientist and a skeptical moralist. But even as a moralist and believer, Pascal was informed by the sobering "spirit of geometry". The piece of paper on which he had jotted down his mystical experience relates it with the precision of a scientific observer; and in the *Pensées,* the rationality of faith is demonstrated in the famous fragment on the theory of probabilities.

Pascal defines man by outlining his definite and definable properties, but exists consciously and thus surpasses himself, human nature has to be defined in terms of the "human condition". Pascal's basic definition of it at first seems purely formal and external. He defines it in terms of mathematical limits. Man is a "seeming mean" between the two mathematical infinities, the infinitely great and the infinitely small, the Infinite and the Nothing of spatial and temporal extension. Or, to

use an arithmetical analogy, man exists like a zero between an ever increasing and an ever decreasing series of numbers. The zero itself is not a number like other numbers, but qualitatively different. The infinitely great and the infinitely small (in number, space and time) are similar to each other, but are dissimilar to the finite standpoint from which they are judged as infinite. This position between two horizons of infintiy is to Pascal analogous to the condition of man within the universe. Man exists between two fathomless infinites or "abysses". Between two such precipices, however, man has no definable standpoint, but rather his position is "floating". His position is the condition of a "seeming mean" between the All and the Nothing. It is man's condition to be "Nothing in comparison with the infinite, an All in comparison with the Nothing".

The word "condition", therefore, does not have the same meaning as in the popular phrase of "being conditioned", scientifically, socially, psychologically, and so forth. What Pascal has in mind is not particular conditons which determine man's range of freedom, but the total and unique situation of man within the whole of being, something which is quite independent of the question of determinism and free will. Pascal's definition is an attempt to locate man, to assign him his correct place within the universe. But this place turns out to be nowhere and everywhere. This condition in the universe outside us is at the same time analogous to man's inner condition. Man is suspended, not only between the two mathematical infinities of the infinitely great and the infinitely small, but he is also extended and suspended between greatness and misery.

In bare outline, this is the human condition sketched in fragment No. 72 of the *Pensées,* which opens a section on "Man". Though editors have improved the context of Pascal's thought by rearranging the 924 fragments of the *Pensées,* this work remains, like Nietzsche's last work, a disorderly mass of notes which Pascal had jotted down during the last years of his short life with the intention of defending the Christian faith against the sophisticated gentlemen of his time. It is a modern apology because it applies the infinite horizon of modern science to the elucidation of the condition of man. The arguments lead up to the crucial point where man has to find for himself the answer to those questions which are involved in his essential displacement, his being *égaré,* bewildered, and gone astray.

In a note which can be considered as a preface to the section on

"Man", Pascal states that he had spent much time in the study of the abstract sciences but had been disheartened by the small number of fellow students with whom he could converse about these difficult matters. Thus he turned, like Descartes, to the study of man. But he found that still fewer studied man than studied geometry, for a serious study of man is even more exacting and solitary than that of the abstract sciences. To study the human condition correctly, one has to relate it to the condition of the universe, because it is the very disproportion between man and universe which reveals the true condition of man. Under the title "Disproportion," Pascal elaborates on the human condition thus:

> "Let man then contemplate the whole of nature in her full and grand majesty, and turn his vision from the low objects which surround him. Let him gaze on that brilliant light, set like an eternal lamp to illumine the universe; let the earth appear to him a point in comparison with the vast circle described by the sun; and let him wonder at the fact that this vast circle is itself but a very fine point in comparison with that described by the stars in their revolution round the firmament. But if our view be arrested there, let our imagination pass beyond; it will sooner exhaust the power of conception than nature that of supplying material for conception. The whole visible world is only an imperceptible atom in the ample bosom of nature. No idea approaches it. We may enlarge our conceptions beyond all imaginable space; we only produce atoms in comparison with the reality of things. It is an infinite sphere, the center of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere. [...]
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> Returning to himself, let man consider what he is in comparison with all existence; let him regard himself as lost in this remote corner of nature; and from the little cell in which he finds himself lodged, I mean the universe, let him estimate at their true value the earth, kingdoms, cities, and himself. What is a man in the Infinite?
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> But to show him another prodigy equally astonishing, let him examine the most delicate things he knows. Let a mite be given him, with its minute body and parts incomparably more minute, limbs with their joints, veins in the limbs, blood in the veins, humours in the blood, drops in the humours, vapours in the drops. Dividing these last object at which he can arrive be now that of our discourse. Perhaps he will think that here is the smallest point in nature. I will

let him see therein a new abyss. I will paint for him not only the visible universe, but all that he can conceive of nature's immensity in the womb of this abridged atom. Let him see the rein an infinity of universes, each of which has its firmament, its planets, its earth, in the same proportion as in the visible world; [...] Let him lose himself in wonders as amazing in their littleness as the others in their vastness. For who will not be astounded by the fact that our body, which a little while ago was imperceptible in the universe, itself imperceptible in the bosom of the whole, is now a colossus, a world, or rather a world, or rather a whole, in respect of the nothingness which we cannot reach? He who regards himself in this light will be afraid of himself, and observing himself sustained [...] will tremble at the sight of these marvels. [...]

For in fact what is man in nature? A Nothing in comparison with the Infinite, an All in comparison with the Nothing, a mean between nothing and everything. Since he is infinitely removed from comprehending the extremes, the end of things and their beginning are hopelessly hidden from him in an impenetrable secret. [...] Through failure to contemplate these Infinites men have rashly rushed into the examination of nature, as though they bore some proportion to her. It is strange that they have wished to understand the beginnings (principles) of things, and thence to arrive at the knowledge of the whole, with a presumption as infinite as their object. For surely this design cannot be formed without presumption or without a capacity infinite like nature. [...]

Our intellect holds the same position in the world of thought as our body occupies in the expanse of nature.

Limited as we are in every way, this state which holds the mean between two extremes is present in all our impotence. Our senses perceive no extreme. Too much sound deafens us; too much light dazzles us; too great distance or proximity hinders our view. Too great length and too great brevity of discourse tend to obscurity; too much truth is paralyzing. [...] First principles are too self-evident for us; too much pleasure disagrees with us. Too many concords are annoying in music; too many benefits irritate us. [...] Extreme qualities are prejudicial to us and not perceptible by the senses. [...] Extreme youth and extreme age hinder the mind, as also too much and too little education. In short, extremes are for us as though they were not, and we are not within their notice. They escape us, or we them."

Pascal concludes that if this constitutional incapacity of man to comprehend the infinites and to reach an ultimate ground and end is well understood, "we shall remain at rest, each in the state wherein nature has placed him". For in comparison with these unattainable infinities, all finites are equal, i.e., equally far removed from the first and the last things of philosophical and theological presumptions. The final result of Pascal's considerations thus seems to lead us back to the skeptical wisdom of Montaigne, who concludes his "Defense of Raymond Sebonde" with an explicit rejection of the idea that man should surpass the natural limits of his nature. It seems to be in the spirit of Montaigne when Pascal says that since we cannot grasp the extremes, and thereby the whole, "nothing is good but mediocrity. The majority has settled that and finds fault with him who escapes it at whichever end. [...] To leave the mean is to abandon humanity".

Yet, Pascal is far from identifying himself with the settled skepticism of Montaigne. He acknowledges the human condition of mediocrity – this analogy of the "seeming mean" between the two infinites – only with the qualification that it is most contrary to our deepest aspiration: to surpass mere humanity by the search for an ultimate foundation from whence to reach the Absolute.

What completes our incapacity to know something perfectly, in the whole and to the end, is that we are composed of mind and body. If we were simply matter, we would not know anything. Being body and mind, we know that we are mind and body and that each reacts upon the other; but we do not understand how a mind can be at all united to a body, since mind and body are not different modes of a single substance, but separated in principle by an infinite distance. The infinite distance between mind and body is, however, not the last riddle. It is only a weak analogy to an "infinitely more infinite distance", namely that between mind and charity, in the Christian sense: "From all bodies together we cannot draw forth one little thought; this is impossible and of another order. From all bodies and minds, we cannot produce a feeling of true charity; this is impossible and of another, supernatural order."

The distinctions between matter, that which does not know itself, body and mind, that which knows itself and something else, and charity, that which lives by the knowledge of faith, have their analogy in three different orders of the human condition: the men of material or worldly power, the men of spirit, and the men of holiness. In all three

kinds of order, greatness and power are possible and deserve respect and admiration. The saints have their power, glory, and victory, but they have no need of the wordly greatness of kings and the rich, or of the intellectual excellence of men and of genius. The power of kings over subjects and the power of great minds over inferior ones neither add to nor take from the superior rank of saintliness, of which the other kinds of greatness are but an analogy. Jesus Christ, the perfect model of holiness, was without any worldly power and riches and without any exhibition of knowledge. "He did not invent, he did not reign." He was humble, patient, and holy to God, without sin, and his greatness was manifested in lowliness. "But there are some who can only admire worldly greatness, as though there were no intellectual greatness, and others who only admire intellectual greatness, as though there were not infinitely higher things in wisdom." These three orders of greatness constitute a discontinuous hierarchy, as discontinuous as the geometrical hierarchy between a point and a line, a line and a plane, a plane and a body. For a point cannot be extended into a line, nor can a line be divided down to a point. To sum up with Pascal's words:

> "All bodies, the firmament, the stars, the earth, and its kingdoms, are not equal to the lowest mind, for mind knows all these and itself, and those bodies nothing. All bodies together, and all minds together, and all their products, are not equal to the least feeling of charity. This is of an order infinitely more exalted."

Thus man's "disproportion" in the universe does not imply the absence of any order, but rather indicates a kind of discontinuous order evidenced by the three different and yet analogical kinds of greatness.

Man's aspiration toward greatness is, however, inseparable from man's essential misery, deficiency, and want. It is the mark of man's excellence that, whatever possessions and gifts he may have, he is never satisfied with his condition. The greatness of man is proved by his wretchedness. That *we know* our misery is, however, essential for misery itself. If we did not know how to be miserable, we would not be so. A crippled tree or a ruined house is not miserable because it is not aware of its state. Thus the greatness of man lies in the fact that he knows himself to be miserable. On the other hand, one cannot feel miserable without some knowledge of a better state. Nobody is unhappy because he does not have three eyes or two mouths, but anyone is miserable if he is deprived of what he once had. Thus the present misery of man proves

his greatness – it is the misery of a "deposed king". But how to explain this fallen state of man if not by the doctrine of original sin–though the latter itself may be inexplicable? The arguments in Pascal's search for an answer to the problem of man thus lead up to the mystery of man's original sin and the corresponding mystery of God's revelation in redeeming man. Both myseries ultimately explain, for Pascal, man as the "seeming mean" between the All and the Nothing, between greatness and misery, power and impotence. It is the Christian faith alone which can elucidate the combination of greatness and misery in the human condition; for the philosophical schools which stress either man's misery or his greatness are each unable to comprehend the contradicting truth of both states. Nor can the half-truths of both schools be combined to make a whole truth; rather, on their own level they annihilate each other, to make way for the truth of the Gospel. The Christian faith teaches us to attribute man's misery to his fallen nature and his greatness to grace. This union of nature and grace, of misery and greatness, is but an image of the two natures in the single person of Jesus Christ, the man-God. The crucified Christ unites perfectly both infinite greatness and infinite misery. On the human level alone, the contradiction remains unresolved; man as such is a monstrous confusion. "We have an idea of happiness, and cannot reach it. We perceive an image of truth and possess only a lie. Incapable of absolute ignorance and of certain knowledge we have thus been manifestly in a degree of perfection from which we have unhappily fallen." Seen in the light of the Christian revelation, nature is such that she testifies everywhere, within man and without, to a lost God and a corrupt, unredeemed nature. Now the two mathematical infinities, the All and the Nothing, can be understood in their true significance: the infinity of space and time is the greatest mark of the almighty power of God, who created the All out of Nothing. The extremes between which man is placed "meet and reunite by force of distance, and find each other in God, and in God alone".

If we depart from the Christian coordinates, the greatness and misery of man are liable to be leveled down to the trivial experience that all things human are ambiguous and that everybody enjoys and suffers equally his ups and downs. Pascal knew, of course, the average condition of man, between *ennui* and *divertissement*, between idleness and busyness, pride and despondency; but he saw it from a vantage point which surpasses it. He became more and more firmly convinced that only the Christian doctrine and the Gospel can answer the quest which

is Man. Accordingly, in his last years Pascal retired to a monastery where he wrote the *Pensées* during the intervals of his meditations, after having given away his worldly possessions and renounced his pride in the pursuit of science, particularly geometry, "the most beautiful trade in all the world", but after all only a trade, like that of any "skillful artisan". "Philosophers", he once remarked, "they astonish ordinary men who are less educated; Christians, they astonish philosophers". Pascal was both, a philosopher trained in mathematics and physics and also a modern apologist in the succession of Augustine. As a Christian thinker, he wrote against Descartes, blaming him for having extended the certainty of reason too far. As a modern Christian thinker, he realized the condition of modern man as no one else before or since.